

January 31, 2010 - In Face of Critics, Rep. John Murtha Does it His Way

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WASHINGTON,
D.C. — When Rep. John Murtha
first heard about President Obama's proposal to freeze discretionary spending,
he smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, he can call for it, but we're the guys who make
the decision," said Murtha, 77. "I always remind them of that."

"Them" means presidents. Murtha has served with
eight in his 36-year career. On Friday, the Johnstown Democrat is set to become
the longest-serving member of Congress to represent Pennsylvania, surpassing Rep. Joseph McDade,
a Scranton Republican, who served from 1963 to 1999.

During his years in Washington,
Murtha has infuriated and endeared himself to nearly every ideological camp in
the country. He survived federal corruption investigations, pushed the military

to spend billions of dollars on cancer and AIDS research, led the charge for one war in Iraq and rallied opposition to another.

He watched the Marine barracks in Beirut explode months after telling the president to pull troops out, and watched the Berlin Wall collapse after a decade of supporting the same president's anti-Soviet policies. He brings tens of millions of dollars a year to his sprawling district, much through his chairmanship of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, but warns that borrowing to pay for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq threatens the country's economic future.

"Murtha is among a disappearing class -- the classic Washington insider who actually makes the system work," said Bert Rockman, head of Purdue University's political science department.

The disappearance can't happen soon enough for some. Murtha champions earmarks, the individual projects lawmakers insert into enormous spending bills. Critics say the practice is uncompetitive, puts local interests ahead of the national good and invites corruption.

"There are (good) ways to become the longest-serving member of Congress from Pennsylvania, and then there's the way Congressman Murtha" did it, said Tom Schatz, president of the watchdog group Citizens Against Government Waste. Of Murtha's coming milestone, he said: "I am sure Rep. Murtha will be earmarking that date on his calendar."

Murtha said earmarks "are what I am here about."

"I am here to help take care of the district," Murtha said. "I represent it, and I don't apologize for it."

The state will miss him when he's gone, said former Rep. Bud Shuster, R-Everett.

"He will go down in history as the most effective congressman that this state has ever seen," said Shuster, whose fondness for earmarks earned him many of the same critics as Murtha.

Colleagues credit Murtha with being one of the most adept at reaching across party lines. In an increasingly-polarized capital, Murtha's bills typically pass with bipartisan support.

"He sticks up for people. He works with them. He's the quintessential chairman of a committee," said Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson of Connecticut.
"He's a member's member."

MAKING A DEAL

The art of compromise, such as legislative deals he helped broker between President Reagan and his mentor, former Speaker Tip O'Neill, is fading, Murtha said.

"Some of the younger ones that have just come in, on both sides, they don't want to talk to each other. They just talk at cross-purposes," Murtha said. When he arrived in 1974, "I didn't talk for six months. Today, they get up here and the day they get here they're talking. These guys are talkative."

Murtha won his seat in January 1974, in a special election to fill the unexpired term of the late Republican John Saylor.

He decided to run for the seat "the minute that Saylor died." Then a state representative, his Watergate-era campaign slogan was: "One honest man can make a difference." National Democratic leaders wanted him to run a campaign on national issues. He declined.

"This isn't a national election. This is a local election," Murtha said.

He won his first race by 122 votes out of 120,000 cast, becoming the first Democrat to represent the 12th District since 1943. A photograph of O'Neill swearing him in hangs in the foyer of his Capitol Hill office.

Five years later, Murtha became embroiled in the Abscam investigation, where FBI agents posing as Saudi sheiks tried to bribe members of Congress. Murtha was videotaped saying he wasn't interested in the \$50,000 they offered, and federal agents decided he was trying to attract investment to his district, but the scandal has dogged him ever since. The FBI recording appeared in a campaign ad against him in 2006.

More recently, PMA Group, a lobbying group started by a former aide, was raided by the FBI. Murtha has said his office hasn't been contacted by investigators. Accusations that he steered money to the firm's clients in exchange for campaign cash is "pure politics," he said.

Larson defended Murtha as a careful steward of public money, noting his subcommittee rejected two-thirds of the spending requests it received this year, including several of his projects.

"If you haven't presented him with a good idea ... he'll tell you to go back and work on it," Larson said. "Mr. Murtha's the kind of guy that can tell you to go to hell and you look forward to the trip after he's done consoling you. We call that Irish diplomacy."

A student of history, Murtha has a fascination with epic failures, from the collapse of overextended world powers to empires bled dry in the mountains of Afghanistan. He says he read Tolstoy's "War and Peace" five times, and sent Paul Kennedy's "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers" to presidential advisers since the first Bush administration.

Murtha began building his foreign policy credentials 20 years before running for Congress. He learned Russian at Washington & Jefferson College "because I thought the Soviet Union was a threat to our national security." He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1952 and volunteered for duty in Vietnam in the 1960s "because in Vietnam, I thought we were fighting the Soviet Union, the Chinese, communism."

He broke with the Democratic Party by siding with President Reagan to support anti-communist forces in Central America. He aided Rep. Charlie Wilson's efforts to covertly supply the Afghan mujahedeen with Stinger missiles and anti-tank weapons in their fight against the Soviet army.

These are the things of which he's most proud. Another war proved to be his greatest regret.

Iraq
haunts him.

"That's probably the biggest disappointment I had. (Former Vice President Dick) Cheney was a good friend of mine," until Murtha came out against the Iraq war in November 2005, he said. He corralled Democratic support for the 1991 Gulf War -- something he calls one of his proudest accomplishments -- and voted to authorize the 2003 invasion.

His change of heart turned the Democratic hawk into an unlikely hero of the anti-war left.

"He told the caucus (about his decision) right before his press conference," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. The announcement surprised many, including her. "It wasn't a question of clearing it with me. He was going to say what he was going to say."

Murtha's history of support for military spending and intervention gave cover to the war's opponents, who were accused of being unsupportive of U.S.

troops. Pelosi attended events around the country where the mention of Murtha's name brought raucous cheers, often when he wasn't there.

"His credentials, in terms of the needs of the military, ... are unsurpassed," Pelosi said. "So when he speaks, members listen."